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ABSTRACT

A study examined the incentives and barriers to participation in adult basic education programs for African-Americans in New York City. Data were collected in a series of focus group meetings. Participants were potential students who had contacted but not yet enrolled in a program. They saw strong personal motivation as the essential factor in contacting, enrolling, and persisting in adult basic education. This complex factor was strongly influenced by the social and economic context that shapes the individual histories of African-American adults in need of basic education, including prior educational experience, perceptions of job mobility, family and life-cycle influences, and individual goals. The second half of this report begins with recommended program guidelines to improve program outreach and recruitment, implement more humane intake procedures, and improve retention. The paper concludes with the challenges presented by the data for future policy, research, and practice concerned with African-American adults in need of basic education services. (Six references are appended.) (YLB)

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ACCESS TO ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

AFRICAN-AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES

PROGRAM GUIDELINES FOR **RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

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June 1990

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LITERACY ASSISTANCE CENTER, INC. 15 Dutch Street, 4th Floor New York NY 10038

This report is based on a study conducted by the Literacy Assistance Center, with support from the New York State Education Department. Dr. Verna Haskins Denny, former Senior Research Associate at the Literacy Assistance Center, designed the study, facilitated the focus groups and analyzed the data, as described in her report to the funder. The following staff members of the Literacy Assistance Center assisted in this research:

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PREFACE

The New York City Adult Literacy Initiative was implemented in 1984 to strengthen and expand literacy services for New York City adults and older youth. The Initiative, jointly sponsored by the New York City Mayor's Office of Education Services and the New York State Education Department, currently offers a range of programs for a diverse population of individuals who want to improve their spoken English or basic literacy skills. Programs which are offered throughout the five boroughs of the city serve approximately 50,000 students annually, with waiting lists of about 15,000.

One of the goals of the New York City Adult Literacy Initiative is to recruit and retain those individuals most in need of services. Thus, it is important to ask whether programs are readily accessible to all individuals who need them and to examine the processes for recruiting and enrolling adult students.

Information drawn from LAC studies, analysis of demographic data on student participants in New York City programs, and practitioner observations suggests that U.S.-born African-Americans are underrepresented in adult literacy programs in the city. When we look at the figures on adult learners enrolled in Basic Education programs, we see that a large percentage of students identified themselves as black, and thus we might conclude that we are reaching this population. However, if we go beyond an initial view of the data, we see that many of these black students are not native born, but rather immigrants to this country. As figures from reports on school completers and drop-outs reveal, there are large numbers of native-born African-Americans who have had access to our public schools, but who are still in need of improving their basic literacy skills, including reading, writing, and problem-solving. Therefore, access to literacy programs remains critical so that this population may enhance their ability to participate productively in their economic and social communities.

The Access study, from which this report was developed, was undertaken by the Literacy Assistance Center in 1989 in order to gain information about those processes which may either encourage or hinder the enrollment and retention of native-born African-Americans in adult literacy programs. The aims of the study were to gain increased insight into these processes, to identify barriers which may prevent adults from entering or remaining in programs, and to suggest guidelines to improve these practices. Through this study we hope to achieve increased access to programs for native-born African-Americans who may need or want adult education services. Although specific to native-born African-Americans, the guidelines that are drawn from the findings of this study may apply to other populations as well.

Appreciation and thanks are extended to all the adult learners who participated in this study and provided the information and insights which led to the guidelines presented in this paper. Because of their commitment and participation, access for many others should be enhanced.

June 1990

Angela M. Covert, Ed.D.
Executive Director

INTRODUCTION

"I was ready to enroll, and I was still embarrassed. I'm telling you. . . I really want to go back to school so I can write a book about this, because . . .I'm 36 years old and it took me a long time . . . to tell somebody, listen, I have problems reading. . . . And it took a long time for me to submit to myself that . . .you can't do it, and open up, nobody can help you if you don't let them know that you need help. I wouldn't let nobody – I was scared. It was fear, someone would laugh at me, someone would say I was a grown man don't know how to read, what happened to you? And it took me a long time, and hurt, a lot of pain, a lot of . . . self-searching and praying to get that strength to go to somebody."

African-American man on waiting list for a program

In the spirit of this quote, the information and guidelines presented here aim to articulate the experiences of African-Americans[1] in need of adult basic education services as they themselves voice them.

The intent of the study on which this report is based was to address the ways in which program intake, outreach and retention are experienced by African-Americans who want and need the services of adult basic education programs. It grew out of increasing national and local attention to adult literacy in the United States, as well as out of a consensus among researchers and practitioners that recruitment into and initial contact with literacy programs are key to individual decisions to pursue adult basic education.

Both the experience of literacy practitioners and preliminary analyses of data from New York City programs suggest that African-Americans in need of services are not being reached by existing

1 Although the term African-American sometimes refers widely to the New World diaspora of persons of African ancestry, it is used here to refer to persons of African descent born in the United States.

basic education programs[2]. The study reported on here attempts to understand the incentives and barriers to participation for this group in particular.

A NOTE ON METHODOLOGY

Data for this research were collected in a series of focus group meetings. Such groups, in which participants respond to specific questions and topics in an open-ended manner, are especially suited to exploring issues in which the perspective of a particular group is sought. This methodology allows participants to frame issues and answers in their own terms, and to include in their descriptions and explanations information which might be excluded by other kinds of research instruments. Focus group methodology was selected for this study as a way in which African-Americans in need of basic education services could voice their experiences of how such programs encouraged or discouraged their enrollment. Focus groups were made up of either currently enrolled students or of adults who had expressed interest in attending adult basic education programs. Second meetings of groups of currently enrolled students also included one or two program staff members[3].

Program staff and current students who participated were selected on the basis of initial recommendation by teachers and counselors as well as their willingness to participate.Attempts were made to achieve representation of different kinds of programs and students in each group. The table on the following page shows the characteristics and number of people in each of the three resulting groups, each of which met twice.

2 Although the need for basic education services among African-Americans, as compared with immigrant black adults, cannot be directly estimated from available data, the percentage of the latter among Basic Education students in the citywide data base is 40%. Yet, less than 25% of New York City's total population is foreign born, and many of these immigrant adults attend English for Speakers of Other Languages, rather than BE, classes. These data seem to support informal observations of adult education practitioners regarding under-representation of African-Americans in their classes.

3 Detailed information on the study and methodology can be obtained from the Literacy Assistance Center.

CHARACTERISTICS & NUMBERS OF PARTICIPANTS IN FOCUS GROUPS

FOCUS GROUP	Total Number	Gender M	Gender F	Number of Parents	Number of Unemployed	Number on Public Assistance
Brooklyn	9		9	8	7	0
Bronx/Manhattan	6	2	4	6	6	2
Queens	7		7	6	2	4

Potential students (those who had contacted but not yet enrolled in a program) were recruited for the focus groups through the LAC's literacy referral hotline. This resulted in a much smaller number of participants than anticipated; only six potential students finally formed a single focus group which met once, and one potential student attended a one-on-one session with an interviewer. Nevertheless, very rich data emerged from the potential students who took part.

Many attempts were made to convene a focus group composed of individuals who need adult education services but who have never contacted programs. For a variety of reasons, these attempts were unsuccessful. The perspective of these African-Americans, particularly the men among them, remains a crucial area for study. The relatively low participation of African-American men, in programs and in the focus groups themselves, underscores the importance of obtaining their views on adult education programs.

There was a general consensus among focus group participants regarding the barriers and incentives to participation of African-Americans in adult education programs. These ideas are presented in this report. The social and personal contexts which motivate African- Americans to seek out and persevere in adult education programs are considered first, followed by their implications for recruitment, intake and retention, including specific recommendations for programs which were suggested in the focus groups. This paper concludes with the challenges presented by the data for future policy, research and practice concerned with African-American adults in need of basic education services.

INDIVIDUAL MOTIVATION: FAMILY AND SOCIAL CONTEXTS

Strong personal motivation was seen by participants as the essential factor in contacting, enrolling and persisting in adult basic education. As discussed by those in the focus groups, personal motivation is a complex factor strongly influenced by the social and economic context which shape the individual histories of African-American adults in need of basic education.

PRIOR EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Adults bring to the decision of enrolling in an adult education program a wealth of prior educational and social experience. In addressing the motivation of African-Americans in particular, racism emerges as a pervasive condition affecting school experiences and perceptions of the relationship between education and social mobility. In discussing her brother's experience in the school system, one participant stated:

> ***"I think the system doesn't want black males to succeed."***

Another recalled alienating classroom references to Africa as "the Dark Continent" in the context of discussing his own negative educational background.

Experiences with other programs touted as improving life for African-Americans also made some participants wary of approaching basic education programs:

> ***"Why join a program, work for a while, then have it all fade out, then when they come up with something else you get back on line and start the whole thing over? I don't think like that anymore — like the poor little welfare person when the program has faded out, she's faded out right along with it."***
>
> *Mother of four grown children*

PERCEPTIONS OF JOB MOBILITY

Experience shaped by racism likewise informs the perceived relationship between education and job opportunities, as the following excerpts from a discussion among African-American women clarifies:

> ***"I don't like to get into this race thing, but say the black man, he went to school — elementary school, college — then here's this white boy, he did the same thing but the white boy's going to get the job. The black man says: 'Why am I going to break my ass? I'm not going anywhere.'"***

> ***"Most of these jobs some of these black men got, they don't have to read to do it. Like construction, or working on the waterfront. Most of these people, white and black, don't know how to read."***

> ***"Look at the road crews. You've got 15 whites and 2 blacks and they're doing different jobs. And the blacks on the street are seeing this. And they can do the job."***

These female participants describe a world in which both educated and uneducated African-American men face discrimination. Given this reality, drugs represent either an escape or an alternative way to earn money:

> ***"And that reality . . .makes people go to the bottle or go to something else, some type of substance abuse because they can't deal with the reality of coping with life itself, and it's more . . .of an escape to run to something that's not going to help you than to go get help."***
>
> *Male potential student*

Among the young in particular, the lure of fast money earned in the underground drug economy is perceived as presenting a more viable opportunity for mobility than education, according to focus group discussants.

Alternatively, there are some African-American adults who, despite their educational shortcomings, have succeeded in acquiring a lifestyle with which they are satisfied; they thus lack motivation to seek out adult basic education:

> ***"They're content in their lives. They stay home and have money coming in. Others may have a job and are comfortable in it."***
>
> *Mother of three, current student*

FAMILY AND LIFE CYCLE INFLUENCES

Despite these circumstances, the focus group participants represent people who have made a decision to enroll in or contact basic education programs. Their discussions of why they did so emphasized generational and life cycle influences, most notably the effect of being parents:

> ***"I have a 16 year old. He wanted me to help him with his homework. I read on a 4th or 5th grade level. If I didn't know one of the words, my son would say 'What?' Now with my second child, I'm trying to get this child like I did my son — always with a book. I came across a word when I was reading to her — 'inseparable' — and I stopped and she said 'What is it? What is it?' I broke it down and I figured it out. My son said to me, 'They have so many opportunities, why don't you do it?' . . . I went back 'cause I can't survive in this world without it."***
>
> *Mother of two, currently enrolled in a program*

"This is not the first time I went back to school. About 15 years ago I went to school on 155th Street . . . .Five years later I went back, but I wasn't in the right frame of mind, so I left. Now my children are all grown and I have time. It's my time."

Mother of four, now a student in a GED program

"In high school, I didn't understand a lot of things. You were supposed to ask questions when you didn't understand, but the other kids laughed at me 'cause I had to ask the same thing over and over. I went back to school in the '70s and the same thing happened. Then my daughter asked me to read to her. She's in the top first grade class, and she came home with homework that I couldn't even do."

Current female GED student

Evident in these quotes is the effect of family circumstances on the decision to contact a program. Wanting to be able to help children who are in school or having time to concentrate on school when one's children are grown were the most common situations providing motivation for current students. Underscoring the life cycle dimension of this familial context were support and encouragement provided by family members, who in some cases also referred enrolled students to particular programs:

"I came to this program because of my sister. I just moved up here from Richmond, Va. I was in a program there. My son was in a program, and after he graduated, I had him off my hands."

Woman currently enrolled in a GED program

"One reason me and my sister came back was because we felt guilty. Our mother is 69—she went back to school about four years ago. She got her diploma, then went to LaGuardia

[College]. We were the oldest and we were more likely to help her out. Our grandfather went back to school at 85."

Current female student

The story of this family challenges notions of generational illiteracy, which often assume that low literacy is cyclically reproduced in families. Instead, these quotes reveal a complex pattern of inspiration and practical support among kin of varying ages that enables people to seek out and stay in programs at different stages of the life cycle.

INDIVIDUAL GOALS

The desire for improvement in one's own life, attached to either specific goals (such as obtaining a better job or acquiring a GED) or a more general desire to improve skills and understanding were also described:

"I was in the hospital once and there was a woman who was really sick—she had tubes down her throat and couldn't speak, but she could write everything. And I thought 'What if I get in that position? What am I going to do?' I'm a sick person, but that ain't stopping my two feet from walking to a program."

A female student currently enrolled in a program at the Public Library

" 'Cause . . .when you get in trouble, instead of having a Walkman in your apartment to listen to music, put it on the table like you have it over there. You tape the conversation and when you get on the train, take the Walkman, put the tape in to listen to what you learned. Because reading is just like music when you think about it. After you go over and over with it, it's in your head."

Potential student, female

> ***"Well, basically, like, when I would go look for the job that I wanted, certain jobs that I wanted, I would have . . .a fear of being asked to read, being approached . . .and asked to read something, and it would be fear, it would intimidate me to go out and look for a job. . . .Revolving door of, like, one letdown to another. You know, just constant, going some place and knowing that I could be capable of getting this job or making this type of salary but just come smack in my face with the reality again, you can't read. You haven't had the proper education, right?"***
>
> *Potential student, male*

A combination of family circumstances and individual goals appears to make it possible for individuals to overcome the shame and embarrassment many adults feel about needing basic education. According to focus group participants, this motivating combination typically occurs in older people with family responsibilities and life experiences which taught them the value of education. This is supported by figures from the citywide data base on ages of people currently in BE programs. The ages of over half of these adults fall in the 25-44 range, while less than 10% are age 20 or under. Younger people were said by some in the focus groups to be into fast money, and impatient with education, especially given their negative experiences with it in the school system.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN ADULT LEARNERS:

PROGRAM GUIDELINES

PROGRAM OUTREACH

A number of focus groups discussed the television commercials and programs which focused on adult education. There was agreement that the general image and language used to describe adults in need of basic education are offensive:

> ***"The label you get — illiterate — I don't like that and other people don't like that. I'm not illiterate. People know how to do things, like get around on buses and read street signs. Maybe you could refer to it as helping to better yourself, advancing yourself in reading."***
>
> *African-American mother of three, current student*

Not only does such language feed the fears and embarrassment described by the man quoted on page one, it also conveys mistaken notions of whom programs serve. A current student commented, "I saw that commercial and I said, That's not me. I'm not that low a reader." Another participant agreed, "Me too — I know how to read and write and figure." Language which describes people as upgrading or improving their reading and skills would more accurately reflect the abilities and self-perceptions of focus group participants.

Images of situations which actually motivate people to seek out programs were seen as most effective. The ad which features a man having difficulty reading to his child was one with which many participants identified. For younger African-Americans in need of basic education, some suggested a marketing approach that makes education "as attractive as Reebok sneakers."

Specific suggestions for program outreach included the following:

- Avoid use of the word illiterate and images of adult learners as totally deficient.
- Design ads which are appealing and exciting by using rap music and images which attract the young.

- Continue to publicize hotline and referral numbers, and utilize the African American media to do so.
- Saturate the city with ads, using the subways, radio, and television continuously.
- Use a mobile Literacy Van approach and/or organize a Literacy Drive, working with a coalition of community groups.

RECRUITMENT

Where and when information is given about literacy was also considered by the focus groups. Because personal motivation is so critical, and the circumstances which motivate individuals can occur at any time, it is important that information be available on a basis which allows people to respond to these. Advertising should be regularly scheduled rather than concentrated in campaign fashion; flyers and notices should be placed in churches, hospitals, schools, community organizations, etc. Attempts can be made to contact those who have dropped out of school as well. Door to door recruitment was also suggested, as were strategies which asked current students to talk to those in their neighborhoods and networks: "Each one bring one."

The importance of providing a number to call and clear indications of what to expect was also raised. Videos of actual classes and current students discussing their experiences were suggested as ways of conveying this. This would perhaps help to convince people of the value of education and allay some of their fears about the educational process.

Specific suggestions for program recruitment included the following:

- Recruit through family, community and organizational networks of current students.
- Recruit people through door to door campaigns or on the streets of neighborhoods.
- Reach people by going where they are, using loudspeakers, flyers handed out or placed under doors or in mailboxes.
- Recruit where African-American men are: Boy's Clubs, Urban League, etc.
- Use program participants and/or graduates to recruit others, either as paid head-hunters or as Big Brothers/Big Sisters.

- Connect literacy information and services to public and private institutions:
  - Put information in public places such as social service and unemployment offices, churches, public schools, voting booths, hospitals and libraries.
  - Enlist city schools in recruitment, through PTAs and contacts with dropouts and pregnant teens.
  - Have employers make announcements and provide release time to go to classes.
  - Connect classes to businesses and concrete job possibilities as incentives for participation.

INTAKE PROCEDURES

> ***"Yeah, and they're gonna put me on a waiting list and they're gonna write me a letter and they're gonna do this, they're gonna do that. . . .I'm willing to give up four or five years of my life going back to school. Because I wanna be what I want to be . . . I just want to go back to school and be what I want to be."***
>
> *Male potential student*

This man expressed the frustration encountered by those who have overcome their own fear and hesitation and taken the step of contacting a program, only to be told that there are no available places for them. This frustration is also felt by staff; one staff participant in Brooklyn reported:

> ***"Now we have 45 students who would like to join, but we don't have the room for them . . . We want to sign them up for an Open House then move them into reading groups. We tell them we want them, but I know come August, we'll lose 20 or so."***

Particularly for African-Americans, whose experiences with institutional racism have created resistance to approaching programs, such a reception is very discouraging.

Focus groups discussed ways in which programs could mitigate the effects of delayed placement with sensitivity and continued contact:

> ***"If they speak to someone on the phone who frightens them, who's abrupt, immediately they say 'Forget it, it's the same thing, I'm not going.' If they manage to get up and something bad happens—no one looks up and they stand there for five minutes which is like a year, they'll leave and never come back. The support staff must be trained."***
>
> *A former program participant, now a literacy teacher herself*

> ***"I received a letter, then the teacher called. She was very concerned. You have to have interest in a person. I've heard men say, 'Oh man, I'm gonna have trouble with her by the way she talked!' You have to talk nice."***
>
> *A woman currently enrolled in a program*

> ***"It's like psychology. You have to listen to the students and be understanding when they come in. I waited ten minutes or so, but the woman kept coming back and saying 'I'll be right with you . . .just a few more minutes.' "***
>
> *A mother of two studying for her GED*

Program intake staff make the difference between "five minutes which is like a year" and the ten minute wait punctuated by attention to the prospective student described more favorably in the last quote. The attempt to provide caring and ongoing attention, whether in person, by mail or by phone is noted and appreciated.

Specific suggestions for implementing more humane intake procedures included:

- Encourage student participation in intake, as well as in peer tutoring to help alleviate teacher and program shortages.
- Have students sit in on classes in which they were not formally enrolled.
- Provide communication and experiences which bridge the period between calling a program and entering one.
- Devise less intimidating assessment procedures. Screen people carefully and individually.
- Provide training to sensitize intake staff to student needs and feelings.

RETENTION

Focus group participants were also asked what program characteristics encouraged them to stay in a program. Program support services, the location, timing and composition of classes, the content of material utilized and the quality of instruction were all cited as having an effect on a program's ability to retain students. In addition, the expectations of students regarding their own progress and outcomes emerged as a factor in whether or not they chose to remain in a program.

Counselors affiliated with programs were seen as enhancing students' ability and desire to remain in classes:

> ***"We have two counselors at our largest program. We do more than counsel. They help people get jobs, housing, etc. People say they can't stay in school because they're about to be evicted or their child is going to jail. We can alleviate it so they can go to school."***
>
> *Supervisor of a GED program*

Students enrolled in programs which provided counseling services spoke positively about the encouragement and support they received.

The importance of caring, respectful and patient instructors was also central to student feelings about their programs:

> ***"A lot of times I don't want to get up in the morning but I stick with it . . . .I like my teachers . . . .if you're having trouble, going slow, you have to have someone who understands you."***
>
> *Current female student*

> ***"My teacher played a big part in my life. She sits down and takes time with you. In [traditional] school the teachers said, 'Hey, I got mine. You don't understand it, that's too bad.' "***
>
> *Current female student, mother of three*

> ***"It's communication. You have to be able to talk to students. You have to break apart the barriers of the traditional relationship where I'm the teacher and you're the student. You have to help the student understand what's going on. Let them know where they're standing and where they're going. Don't build castles in the air."***
>
> *Staff member of program for 12-21 year olds*

As suggested by the latter quote, an important part of teacher-student communication and understanding is the teacher's grasp of the situation of adult learners, both educationally and contextually:

> ***"There's a story I like to tell. When a child gets up in the morning, his mother serves him breakfast, gives him his little briefcase, and sends him off to school. At school, his teacher says: 'Now you're going to learn your ABCs,' and the kid learns his ABCs. Kids only have to be in school. But adults got a family, school, and a job — they may learn three new words in***

school, then they get to the job, and your supervisor yells at you — you lost two of those words. Now you only got one word. I tell adults to remember you've got a lot more going on in your life. You've got to be more patient with yourself, and then you might be able to go faster."

Former literacy student who now works with incoming students

"There's a lot you've got to do [besides school]. But when I can't get in to school, I tell my teacher I won't be able to make it. Sometimes she tells me what I can do on my own to make up for the time I'm missing."

Female current student

"That's what I mean by communication. Then the teacher doesn't think 'Oh, she doesn't care.' She thinks the student has other things going on in her life. There might even be some place she can refer you for help."

Worker at adolescent program cited above on communication

The way in which programs are sensitive to the lives of African-American adults in need of basic education services was also raised in terms of the location and scheduling of classes, as well as provision for day care. Problems with night classes included safety concerns associated with traveling at night. Classes held during the day would involve less concerns around safety, but might conflict with work schedules. Work was seen as a necessarily higher priority than adult education. Some suggested that classes held close to their communities would be better attended, while others said some might feel shame at locations where they would be seen by neighbors and friends. The same issues arose for workplace literacy classes—while these would be convenient, students worried about what the implications would be if employers and co-workers knew they were attending. These varying opinions point to the need for options which allow students to choose classes which suit their circumstances and feelings.

The content of classes also surfaced as relevant to program retention. In response to a question about what keeps people in programs, some comments were:

> ***"The work they have. Something that interests you. A teacher to help you out. Black history. Social studies. Things you like. I like math and science. That's what keeps me coming."***
>
> *A woman with grown children enrolled in a GED program*

> ***"They keep it interesting. My school helps you make resumes, job applications. They teach you life skills."***
>
> *Current female student*

Though the content described in these two quotes is different, both convey the importance of finding out which topics speak to the particular interests of students and building a curriculum around these.

Class size and composition were also significant factors, especially when participants discussed recruitment and retention of African-American men. Small classes were seen as mitigating the shame which many feel, and one-on-one tutoring was suggested by several as more attractive to those who had had negative classroom experiences in the past. All male classes were recommended by some as a way to reduce embarrassment of men:

> ***"They [men] go to school in prison 'cause there are no women. They're ashamed to learn in front of women."***
>
> *Currently enrolled female student*

> ***"I talked to a few men; they say they don't have the time, or they wouldn't get anything out of it . . . two hadn't even finished the fifth grade and some said 'I don't want to go to school with a bunch of women.' "***
>
> *Female student with eight grown children*

Although some pointed to a difference between African-American men and foreign men (one focus group participant said being from a foreign country was an "acceptable excuse" for not having learned to read), men appear to be underrepresented in basic education programs across ethnic groups, according to the data in the New York citywide data base[4]. Whether this reflects greater need for or easier access to such programs on the part of women relative to men is a topic for further study.

Linking education to outcomes emerged as an important task for effective retention, as well as for recruitment. Here, there was a range of feelings related to expectations; some saw education as the route to a better job, while others hoped for improvement in their daily lives, such as not hiding their inability to do certain things, or "knowledging" themselves. Many participants hoped for a closer fit between their education program and specific jobs or job skills.

Specific suggestions for improved retention included:

- Consider setting up all male classes to encourage African-American men to come to programs.
- Locate classes in the community, in housing projects, for example, as one of a number of program site choices.
- Increase the number of classes and the times at which they are offered.
- Provide a strong, effective counseling component.
- Provide job counseling and/or job training as part of a program.
- Offer day care at program site.
- Provide patient, caring instructors, peer tutors and student support groups.
- Design class content which reflects student goals and interests, perhaps focusing on specific skills which connect work with study.
- Make stipends available for attendance.

4 According to the data base, roughly two-thirds of those enrolled in Basic Education programs are women.

FOCUS GROUP ISSUES: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Based on the data obtained in the focus groups, one reason why African-Americans are discouraged from coming to programs is because of their experiences with the effects of racism on their life chances, as evidenced by their interactions in the worlds of school and work. Programs can certainly acknowledge this aspect of African-American reality and work actively to ensure that curriculum and program procedures are non-racist and are sensitive to African-American culture. While recognizing the social and economic context which racism has created, focus group participants also cited the shame and embarrassment of adult individuals as major obstacles to the decision to contact a basic education program.

For those who do take such a step, family events and support provide both catalysts and opportunities. Two life cycle stages seem particularly promising from the perspective of both motivation and possibility—parenting of school age children and later adulthood, when children are grown and/or individuals retired. The former suggests that the strong motivation of parents could be enhanced by day care provision, while the latter points to the need to consider older adults in program planning and recruitment.

Participants in the LAC research forum held to present the results of the study stressed the following implications of the findings presented above:

- Attention should be directed to the family and community networks of individuals, both as sources of recruitment and as support for retention.
- More homogenous class composition (e.g., all male classes, neighborhood or workplace specific programs) may facilitate design of relevant class content and strengthen the connections among school, work and community.
- Drop-in classes, or at least more flexible scheduling, are important for both recruitment and retention.
- Effective outreach strategies should utilize the input and services of current students to communicate the value of education.
- Attention to support services, particularly counseling, day care and job-related assistance, is crucial to recruitment.

CHALLENGES FOR POLICYMAKERS, RESEARCHERS AND PRACTITIONERS

The focus group discussions among the African-American current and potential students who participated in this project raise a number of important issues, in addition to the specific programmatic recommendations which were made. Many of these considerations point to the need for stronger connections among the classroom, the community, the family and the work of adult learners.

In order to understand more clearly what this would mean in terms of practical program changes, there is a need for research focused on the contextual realities of New York City students, along the lines of work done by Fingeret (1983) on networks, Reder (1988) on ethnic communities, or Auerbach (1989) on social-contextual approaches to family literacy. Such work would clarify the roles which African-American current and potential students play in their own social networks, communities and kin groups, and the ways in which their interactions in these settings involve literacy. Understanding daily literacy practices, and their relationship to other areas of community expertise, can illuminate how African-American communities in New York City develop and use a variety of "literacies" to meet their needs (Szwed, 1981; Fingeret, 1983). Because a number of focus group participants voiced negative associations with traditional, institutional education, it would be interesting to see how their experiences as adult learners "reproduce or confront" their earlier perceptions of schooling and what the implications of "resistance" might be for adult education classes (Quigley, 1990).

Ethnographic work of this kind could provide qualitative insight into family literacy practice and how this changes generationally. Data from Phase I of the ongoing longitudinal study being conducted by the LAC with a sample of over 600 adult education students suggest that the homes and childhoods of adult basic education students included reading materials (1989). How did and does the home environment intersect with the classroom in ways which discourage or encourage the development of greater literacy? The success experienced by family literacy approaches suggests that this is an important inquiry to pursue.

One emphasis in such work could be on life cycle events and changes and the ways in which these provide impetus or opportunity for the African-American adult to re-enter the classroom. What does this imply for teaching content and method? How can the chance to take advantage

of adult education be expanded to other stages in the life cycle? (For example, if day care provision is expanded, can more parents respond to the desire to be able to help children with schoolwork? Can young adults be reached more successfully?) What policy changes ease the painful choices among school, work and family?

The extent to which some of the issues raised in the focus groups are characteristic of African-Americans and the extent to which they address broad distinctions between native-born U.S. citizens and immigrants should also be considered. Certainly, African-Americans have a specific experience with racism that informs a perspective different in many ways from immigrants in general, as well as from immigrants with whom they share African descent. Understanding and listening to this perspective is crucial to efforts to recruit and retain African-Americans in need of adult basic education. However, many of the issues raised in the focus groups may be significant for other adults as well. Do the U.S.- born children of Latin American and Caribbean immigrants share the critical stance of those in the focus groups toward the lack of opportunities for minorities? We cannot generalize the findings of this research involving African-Americans to other groups with whom they are often compared or contrasted. The distinctions among African-Americans, immigrants, Basic Education students and students in ESOL need to be clarified by further research of this kind in order to avoid associating culturally/racially/ethnically specific populations with incorrect assumptions.

Given the negative experiences expressed in the focus groups regarding racism in the job market, can and should adult basic education provide a stronger link to jobs for African-Americans, especially given the imperatives of the demographic and workplace trends projected for the year 2000? This needs to be explored not just in terms of preparation for specific jobs, but in critical assessments of gatekeeping devices such as requiring a GED.

Finally, if the programmatic, policy and research issues suggested by the participants in this study are heeded, these will need to be implemented and communicated in terms of form, content and dissemination in ways which reach the African-American community. Only then will providers and researchers live up to the courage, persistence and insight of the focus group participants who provided the critical thinking for this report.

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